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ABSTRACT

During the 1980s, the issues that emerge concerning the public and federal interest in education will include the extent of education to be provided at public expense: the relative share of that fiscal burden to be borne by local, state, and federal revenue sources: public funds for nonpublic schools: equal access to education for all students: national performance standards: declining rate of growth in resources: and competition for funds among various social science programs. The capacity of government to maintain a balanced perspective with regard to these issues may be the greatest challenge. (Author/DS)

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CHALLENGES TO EDUCATION IN THE 1980s

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During the 1980s, various issues are likely to emerge concerning the public and Federal interest in education. These issues include the extent of education to be provided at public expense; the relative share of that fiscal burden to be borne by local, State, and Federal revenue sources; public funds for nonpublic schools; equal access to education for all students; national performance standards; declining rate of growth in resources; and competition for funds among various social service programs.

Magnitude of Publicly Supported Education

The aging of the population, the increasing proportion of families in which both spouses are employed, population mobility, reentry into the labor market at midlife, decline in the rate of economic growth, and pressures for support of other governmental services are among the social and economic forces that will affect public attitudes toward education and the quality and quantity of education that will be provided from public funds.

Rather than being an activity that is sought by the young, education will likely become more accepted as a lifelong endeavor. The promise of a high school equivalency certificate may encourage adults who were unable to complete their high school education to return to school.

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In an earlier era, these persons would not have sought additional formal education, but the employment market of the 1980's will require from virtually everyone not only competency in the basic skills but also attention to job related skills that enable employees to adapt to changing employment patterns and job opportunities. Society's interest in supporting these activities may be raised as attention is given to problems related to the underemployed and the unemployed. Another change that appears to be emerging in the educational marketplace is exemplified in those youth who are exercising the option of leaving and then reentering the educational system. By dropping out and later dropping in, they intend to make more mature educational choices concerning future career options.

Interest in preschool programs can be traced to the desire that working mothers have for adequate child care; this interest is reinforced by the growing recognition of the importance of intellectual and social development during a child's early years to assure that maximum benefit is gained from schooling. At the other end of the age spectrum, interest will likely increase in various post high school noncollegiate programs as individuals require supplementary education related to career changes or have greater opportunities to pursue avocational interests because of increased leisure time and early retirement.

There appears to be general agreement that support for preschool programs should be provided through general revenues. However, for various noncollegiate postsecondary programs, some observers would differentiate between the consumer programs that are essentially avocational for the individual and the job training programs that are designed to assist the person in securing employment or upgrading employment status.

Some observers of avocational programs would contend that the student should pay all or some of the cost. For the job training programs, support can be found for society, e.g., the taxpayer, assuming a major share of the cost of the program. The rationale has been that society benefits because of the increased earning power of the persons in the program. The educational system will be challenged to respond to these additional program options during a period of competition for scarce resources.

Funding Public Education

Taxpayer resistance to the property tax in some jurisdictions has dictated either that reductions be made in the level of funding for local schools or that fiscal resources for education have a reduced rate of growth. The public reaction against further increases in revenue from the local property tax and the demands for expanded social services other than education have resulted in education being in a less favored fiscal condition than during the 1950s and 1960s. Demographic, social, economic, and political indicators suggest that this trend will continue in the 1980s.

The number of persons in the traditional school age cohort is declining. Some demographic data suggest that the decline may be reversed in the mid 1980s, but there are no predictions for dramatic growth like that of the 1950s and 1960s. During those two decades, the schools for the first time sought to provide a high schoool education for all pupils and have had mixed success. With this evidence, the crisis of confidence in the schools continues. The schools have not always served their different clienteles

with equal levels of effectiveness, the public has begun to raise serious questions about the efficacy of the public schools in general.

The research economists and sociologists on the educational process have focused attention on the manner in which educational expenditures (inputs) affect student performance (outputs). Research findings have been somewhat mixed concerning the impact that additional expenditures and other types of inputs for education have had on student performance. These research findings have not aided the efforts of education advocates to secure more funds, and advocates for increased funding have been thwarted further by the decline in the level of public confidence in education and the reduced rate of economic growth throughout the 1970s. The education community finds itself competing for funds with various other governmental services whose funding requirements are driven by inflation or an expanding clientele. Thus, in a political environment characterized by shifting power blocs and a shrinking clientele, the relative power of advocates for increased education funds also appears to have declined.

A constituency for education that is currently declining and may continue to do so will not ease the task for State level education policy-makers as they confront two major issues in the 1980s--the level of funding to be provided from State and local sources for education and the degree of discretion that will be retained by local school officials as a decreasing percent of funds for education is provided from local sources. At the Federal level, the policy choice may well be to determine if the pattern of Federal categorical programs is to continue or if Federal funds are to be directed more in the direction of a consolidated grant format.

The latter might use a State plan to assure that certain national priorities are addressed. A potential problem is that this approach may result in the Federal funds being used for revenue displacement at the State or local level, depending upon the intracacies of the State school support program's statutory provisions.

As consideration is given to Federal aid options, two issues emerge: (1) assuring that continued attention is given to such national priorities as compensatory education and education of the handicapped, and (2) contending with the proprietary interest that persons have in initiating and maintaining a program which they support. Specific requirements for the State plan can alleviate that anxiety about the former issue, but continued use of categorical funding mechanism may be necessary with the latter issue.

Various interest groups periodically call for a revision of the manner in which Federal funds are allocated for education, and some advocate groups support the concept of the Federal Government becoming a partner in funding the operational cost of the regular or basic educational program in local schools. Interest in nonrestricted Federal aid for elementary and secondary education may become greater during the 1980s if pressures continue for reduction in the local property tax burden, support increases for interstate equalization in educational funding, and litigation continues to require equal treatment of pupils in educational funding. The braod based revenue generating power of the Federal Government may be an attractive target for those who seek to maintain or increase the level of Federal funding for education.

Public Funds for Nonpublic Schools

Conservative and liberal forces are likely to continue seeking an alternative to public elementary and secondary schools during the 1980s, focusing attention on various methods in which tax funds can be provided for nonpublic schools or tax relief provided to parents paying tuition for their children to attend nonpublic schools. If increases in the number of nonpublic schools with diverse orientations continue in the 1980s, support for some type of public funding is likely to increase. Political response to this support is evident in the voucher proposals introduced in Michigan and California and the tax credit legislation that has been introduced in various State legislatures as well as in the Congress. Some of the current proposals would not be sufficient to pay the full educational cost, but the option of private education might be more attractive to some parents with the incentive of the tax credit.

Some observers fear that the result of providing tuition tax credits may be that parents who can afford the private alternative with its potential for greater economic, racial,or ethnic separateness will pay the price and the public schools will serve only those who cannot afford an alternative. Others contend that tax credits will extend opportunities for an alternative educational program to a larger portion of the population, that they will foster competition between private and public schools, and that this spirit of competition and individual choice is consistent with traditional American values.

Even though the concept of public funds for nonpublic schools has certain attractive features, such as parental support and fiscal relief for institutions, thereare also risks, costs, and concerns. First, there

is the constitutional issue of separation of church and State and the possibility that "excessive entanglement" might result from the provision of funds even though several alternatives have been proposed. Second, individual States have had widely varying levels of success and interest in their efforts to set and enforce standards for nonpublic schools. Third, the issue of eligibility criteria for nonpublic schools to receive public funds remain a point of contention. These criteria include nondiscriminatory admission standards, health and safety standards, adequacy of program offerings, adequacy of equipment, quality and adequacy of staff, and sufficiency of support services.

Equal Access to an Adequate Education

Various Congressional actions and judicial decisions suggest that the most significant educational development in the 1980s may be the efforts exerted to assure that each child has access to an adequate or appropriate educational program. The most obvious examples are found in moves to foster desegregation and eliminate sex discrimination. Recent court decisions suggest that the impetus for these movements will be maintained, and possibly accelerated, in the 1980s. Attempts will likely be made to assure access to programs and to provide for equality of educational opportunity through spending comparability standards, elimination of the vestige of segregation, and equal access to programs.

Another example of equal access may be found in the Individualized Education Program required for each handicapped child under the provisions of P.L. 94-142. The justification for this requirement is not unique with handicapped students, for general acceptance of the concept

that every student has individualized educational needs is conceivable.

National Performance Standards

Concern over declining standardized test scores and general anxiety about student performance will probably continue into the 1980s with various public figures continuing to advocate either a mandatory or voluntary national testing program. Support for standards is currently

found among the staunch advocates for local control of schools as well as among those who would support a higher degree of centralization in the administration of the public schools in the United States. One potential difficulty with the concept is the concern that a national testing program might lead to a de facto national curriculum, with the subsequent result of reducing the diversity that has traditionally characterized American public education. Of course, some observers of American education would counter that the current degree of uniformity in textbook usage among the States actually has the effect of contributing to the development of a de facto national curriculum.

The testing program movement will likely be accelerated by the States' growing tendency to adopt minimum competency standards in the basic skills as a requirement for a high school diploma or as a continuing index of a student's progress. One concern relative to the development of minimum competency standards is that the minimums might become the maximums, and another is that the emphasis on minimum competencies might result in a neglect of other areas that also appear to be critical for survival, e.g., human relations skills, promptness, coping skills, and problem solving.

Perhaps the critical consideration will be related to the Federal role in education and the degree to which Congressionally imposed national performance standards will represent an encroachment upon the responsibility that the individual States have for education. It might be questioned whether Congress should encourage States to develop educational performance standards, but promulgating standards from the Federal level would likely be viewed as a significant threat to the traditions of American public education. This illustration provides an example of one emerging political conflict in the Federal system--the balance of power between State and local governments and the public desire for a Congressional response to a matter that is perceived to be a national problem even though the problem may not be viewed as a direct or traditional Federal responsibility.

Living in a World of Limits

The changes in the traditional American lifestyles that have occurred in the latter half of the 1970s will likely continue into the 1980s, perhaps beyond. Even though some economists suggest that the rising price for fossil fuels is not a major contributor to inflation, the impact is felt in the rising cost of utilities, transportation, industrial production, and fuel-consuming activities. The net result may be that individuals will find it increasingly difficult to maintain their current lifestyles.

Schools may be asked to give their attention to student practices, values, and attitudes of conservation. It would be a significant challenge for the schools to foster this change in attitude and behavior in a culture

long oriented to consumption, growth, and the assumption of abundant resources.

An intriguing possibility is that the rising costs of energy and the resulting impact on the American lifestyle, could be the catalysts that, in the 1980s, will bring about innovative changes in the American public schools that were sought (by some), but did not materialize during the 1960s and 1970s. Energy consumption associated with school operation and transportation, and continuing developments in communications technology, could well be the forces that change the manner in which schools are organized and conducted. With appropriate support and leadership, the concept of education in the 1980s could easily shift from the current emphasis on institutional "schooling" to an emphasis on learning and participation characterized by decentralized learning centers to which teachers move rather than students, a three or four day week of formal instruction, work and service experience integrated into the planned educational program for students, and more extensive use of public television and video-recorders. Though suggesting numerous, inadequately explored problems, this combination of curricular and organizational reform supported by greater use of technology could contribute to a renewed interest in and a higher level of public support for education.

Balancing of Priorities

In view of the developments of the 1960s and 1970s, one of the significant dilemmas confronting policymakers in the 1980s may be to place the requests of special interest groups in perspective as one of the considerations in addressing the totality of educational and

societal interests. In the field of education, as well as between education and other governmental services, various competing interests will likely to continue seeking support forspecial programs or constis-uencies, even to the detriment of others. The capacity of government to maintain a balanced perspective in addressing special as well as general societal needs may well be one of the great societal challenges of the 1980s.